



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087

408.739.1892 • FAX: 408.739.3491

From the Pulpit

Sermon: “Discovering God... in the Surprising Place”

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ March 7, 2010

Acts 8:4-8, 26-39

Genesis 27:41-43; 28:10-17

In life there are both Olympic moments and heroic moments (there are of course plenty of mediocre moments as well but I'm interested in just the first 2 today!) Olympic moments are the ones that we prepare for -- the ones that we know are coming up and that we work hard to get ready to meet. Take Lindsey Vonn for instance: gold medalist in the downhill; bronze in the super- G at the winter games in Vancouver. Lindsey started skiing when she was 2. When she was 10 she met Olympic gold medalist skier Picabo Street who became her role model and eventual mentor. Lindsey has been training for and working towards the gold most of her life; at age 25 this winter she got it.

Olympic moments are like that: they're the ones you know are coming up and that you work hard to get ready for. Olympic moments are calendared and scheduled and you know when they are going to happen and you have time to prepare. And already athletes are training for the *next* Winter Olympics in 2014 in Sochi, Russia.

Of course Olympic moments in this sense don't have to be sporting events -- they're any significant point in time that we know is coming and that we can get ready for: they could be final exams, getting certified or credentialed, giving a speech or graduating from school. They could be weddings or having kids or entering into retirement -- Olympic moments are the big deals of life that we *know* are coming up and so we have a chance to get ready for them -- we get to prepare and choose how we want to respond.

Heroic moments happen spontaneously and so they end up being a surprise. They spring themselves upon us when we least expect it. Heroic moments are those forks in the road, those unexpected circumstances that suddenly pop up in our path and we have to choose whether we are going to step up and respond or just ignore it and take a pass. Olympic moments may produce a champion but heroic moments reveal character. In the life of faith it is often the heroic moment -- the surprise opportunity in the midst of ordinary life -- that shapes and defines our discipleship. What the Bible teaches us is that God is often discovered in these surprising places.

This season of the church year that we are in now is known as Lent. Lent is that time of preparation prior to Easter when we are invited to repent of our sins, renew our faith and ready ourselves for resurrection joy. The liturgical color of the Lenten season is purple. Some of our third-

graders from Logos, our midweek children's program, helped to put up these banners that are flying over our heads here in the sanctuary. The flow of the purple cloth points us towards the cross and a new faith.

But if you're one of those people who notice the colors on our chancel furniture or the color of the stoles that the ministers wear then you'll know that our *usual* color throughout the year is green. Whereas purple is the color for Lent green is the color for the season of the church year that is known as Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is most Sundays and weeks of the year -- it's the ordinary and uneventful experiences of life that we might well call familiar but which are nonetheless important seasons of faith. In fact, heroic moments are those times and places when, in the ordinary course of our life and the common unfolding of our days, God puts someone or something in our path and invites us to suddenly respond and become a part of God's work in the world.

For all of the plans and programs a church may have, in the end, ministry happens in surprising places; the Spirit works through *seemingly* small and insignificant ways -- God's hope and healing pop-up when you least expect it.

Take Philip for instance. We first meet Philip in Acts 6 where it says of him that he was full of the Spirit and was chosen to be one of the first leaders in the emerging Fellowship of Christians in Jerusalem. Not long after that a persecution breaks out in Jerusalem and the Christians are run out of the city and scattered and Philip finds himself suddenly preaching in, of all places: a *Samaritan* city; which at this point in the barely emerging theology of inclusiveness in the early Church would have been a *big* stretch for Philip. Nonetheless, Philip preaches where he's planted and the beginning of our text today tells us of a great revival there in Samaria that breaks out as a result of his ministry. People are healed, demons are cast out, and many make a confession of Christ and become disciples of Jesus. Philip becomes one of the first evangelists of the early Church.

But what follows is the really *surprising* thing. Philip is riding a wave of ministry as big and exciting as one of the surfers out at the Mavericks surf contest. Samaria is on fire and people are coming to Christ and Philip is at the center of a preaching ministry that is an amazing expression of the power of God and then... the Spirit sends him out on a wilderness road. From the center of a revival where crowds are clamoring to be part of the ministry Phillip is sent out to stand on the side of a barren and empty road.

It's a heroic moment for Philip when he can choose to believe that God has a hand in his life *or...* Philip can imagine *he* knows best and can stay there in the church where ministry is obviously happening.

Philip rises to the hero moment and follows the call. The next thing we see of him he is out *hitchhiking* on this wilderness road heading down to Gaza. Philip sees a chariot drive-by and in the chariot is an Ethiopian eunuch -- a court official and head of the treasury of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia: this is an important guy. But Philip recognizes his hero moment and is ready. He runs up to the Chariot and calls up to the man. In the hero moment one needs to hold their expectations of how God will work lightly and be ready for surprises and learn to roll with the moment.

The Ethiopian is a high official; but he's also a spiritual man. He's been to Jerusalem to worship, he's reading the Bible out of the book of Isaiah -- already there have been other influences and other people and other things at work in his life. Already others have sown the seeds and watered them and encouraged their growth and now Philip -- quite by surprise to him... when he least expects it -- Philip is given an opportunity to bring to fulfillment God's work in this man's life.

Here's what I like about Philip -- here's what I want for us in the ministry of our church and in our community: Philip is ready and available; Philip is listening and mindful to where God may be

sending him -- he's ready to be used of God in whatever way is needed -- in whatever surprising place he's called.

Olympic faith moments are like the uplifting women's retreat last weekend or the spiritually challenging youth kayak trip in the Sea of Cortez that 14 of our students went on 2 weeks ago: they are the scheduled and expected opportunities that allow us to experience God in powerful ways and invite us to reaffirm our faith in renewed promises of discipleship. The Step Beyond discipleship experience for 116 of our people that just ended its first phase of classes and is heading into its 2nd phase of living those commitments of faith out over the next 4 months -- that is also an example of an Olympic faith moment that we know is coming and that we choose to be involved with and which helps us to grow in our love for God.

But heroic faith moments are where faith is more commonly lived out and where discipleship proves its mettle. The heroic faith moments are the seemingly random and common -- the mundane and routine -- experiences of life in which, for those whose hearts are open and whose eyes can see, they become sacred moments in which God uses us to do something called ministry.

I wonder if you saw the article in Thursday's Mercury news about Tim Molina, and ordinary Christian man who is a member of El Buen Pastor church in San Jose. The article begins like this: "Tim was on his way home from Wal-Mart when he spotted a young man straddled over a highway 101 overpass in San Jose. The man's arms were outstretched as if they were trying to fly. His face was blank. It seemed to Molina that the man was preparing to jump. Without thinking twice Molina pulled over to help."

The article goes on and it turns out the man *was* intending to commit suicide but Tim talked with him for an hour and eventually coaxed him back off the ledge. See, *that's* a heroic moment. In the ordinariness of life -- on his way home from shopping at Wal-Mart of all things! -- Tim Molina had a chance to be a disciple and to step up to the opportunity to be a partner with God and make a world of difference for one man sitting on the edge of despair and hope.

See, ministry is not something that the clergy alone are called to; ministry is what happens when we respond to God in any given moment and become a part of God's work in the world. Sometimes ministry is significant and profound; sometimes ministry is just a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. But ministry is always about God transforming ordinary moments of life into surprising opportunities in which God can do kingdom work through us.

It's interesting that Philip *leaves* the faith community to travel out to do God's work. Sometimes we imagine the work of the church is inside its walls and on the property of the church. But more often it is out along the road and along the way in the *surprising* meetings that God orchestrates.

So let's expect God to pick us up and put us in situations where we have an opportunity to speak a word of help and hope and be a part of that touch of God in another person's life so they might come to the fullness of faith. Let's be willing to be hitchhikers out on the roads of faith and look for where God's detour will mean surprising ministry. And let this table of grace strengthen us for that purpose and make us heroes of faith.